A Missourian's Honor

By

W. W. Arnold

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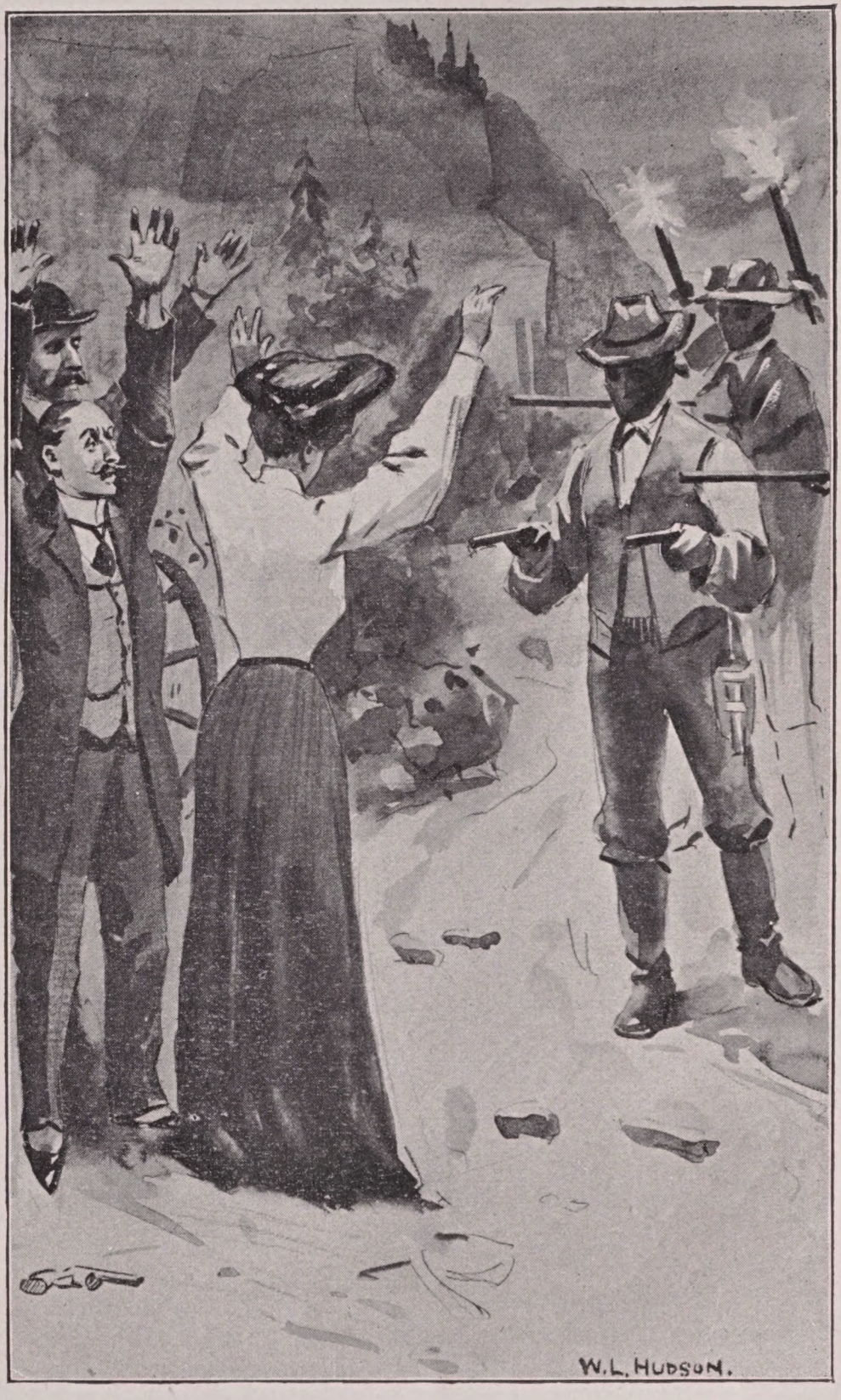

"I am ze French Count!"

A Missourian's Honor

By Walter W. Arnold

3 Drawings by Hudson

Broadway Publishing Company
New York

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A MISSOURIAN'S HONOR.

CHAPTER I.

LOVE'S DISAPPOINTMENT—AN AMERICAN GENTLEMAN.

"STEEL AND BLAND, Brokers."

These words in gilt, on a glazed panel, marked the entrance to the business apartments of the strongest general brokerage firm in St. Louis.

Their rating was at the million mark, but it was well known that only a small proportion of its value was owned by the junior partner, who had been promoted to membership in the firm from the position of manager.

Mr. Steel was a man of fifty, of Scotch-English descent; fastidious in dress, very

proud of his ancestral lineage, and dignified to a marked degree.

He had never married, but maintained a handsome residence in the aristocratic part of the city. This palatial habitation being presided over by a housekeeper and his niece, a beautiful bud of womanhood.

On the date our story opens, Mr. Steel stepped from the elevator, passed through the several rooms of busy clerks, entered his private room and seated himself at his desk.

No attention was given to the neatly arranged pile of open letters which had been placed for his perusal, but the drawn, heavy brows and frown marks on his ordinarily immobile countenance, portended that some question of unusual importance was engrossing his thoughts. Also that its tenor was not of a pleasing nature. After a few moments of reflection, his hand brought forth from an inner pocket a small, folded piece of paper.

The storm cloud gathered on his brow as he regarded the tiny page, and he touched an electric button with unusual emphasis.

"Inform Mr. Courtney that I desire to see him," he remarked to the little office boy who

responded to the call. A moment later the summons was answered by a young man, who stepped quickly into the great magnate's presence.

His movements and bearing betokened that of one entirely familiar with the establishment, in fact, though but young in years, he occupied the responsible position of chief clerk.

He was a manly, handsome fellow. His face showed resolution and firmness of character, but wore a natural, winsome cheerfulness of expression which won him many friends.

Donald Courtney had entered this great establishment when but a lad, and by close, faithful service had advanced to his present responsible position. His strong business sagacity had brought him into the councils of the firm, and he stepped to the side of his superior with eager expectancy.

"Mr. Courtney, will you have the kindness to close the office door?" remarked Mr. Steel, in cold, slow tones.

Mr. Courtney? This was the first time that Donald could remember of having been addressed by his surname by either member of

the firm. The transition was so sudden and unexpected, that his head swam and his eyes burned with the hot flashings of his brain as the request was complied with, and his former position regained.

"What is it, Mr. Steel?" he inquired, in tones of evident concern.

"Did you pen that note?" asked the other, with grave austerity, tendering the dainty missive to the young man.

"DEAR LETTICE:—Will you accompany me in a drive to the World's Fair buildings this evening? DONALD."

A glance was sufficient to enlighten the young man as to its authorship.

He knew that in the past Mr. Steel had made no question of his association as an escort for his niece on every and all occasions. In fact, Donald was accorded the freedom of the household. The young members of their set had long classed them as sweethearts, and he had looked on the silver crested clouds of the future with undoubted expectation of the the time when he could ask Mr. Steel for this treasure.

Indeed, the friendship between his employer and himself had been so warm and lasting that the possibility of a rejection of his suit had not been considered. His tormented brain could form no logical hypothesis for the present unexpected and inconsistent condition of affairs, and the embarrassment of his position pressed keenly upon him.

"I did not think——" he began, with evident confusion.

"Reply to my question," interrupted Mr. Steel, sternly.

"Yes, sir," replied Donald, firmly.

"This is an absurd presumption——"

"Presumption, sir," quickly interjected Donald, with asperity.

"Presumption," almost thundered Mr. Steel. "Do you understand me—execrable presumption, sir. What excuse have you to offer for this audacity?" he added, rising.

Young Courtney bit his lips in an effort to subdue the tempest of anger that almost overmastered his control. After a moment's pause, his flashing eyes assumed a more tempered expression, and he replied in firm tones:

"I love her, sir."

"Love her—preposterous!" exclaimed Mr. Steel, and he began to pace nervously up and down the office.

His hasty movement was evidently for the purpose of regaining composure, and to give the question deeper thought.

"Does my niece share this sentiment?" he inquired, pausing and regarding the other with a look which showed all the acrimony of his mind.

"Our mutual affection has been the growth of years, sir."

"Then it must stop right now," returned Mr. Steel, emphatically.

"Is there any question as to my integrity?" Donald protested. "Am I not worthy to aspire to the hand of your niece?"

"The standard of your reputation has no possible bearing on the matter," rejoined Mr. Steel, firmly. "My niece is of most aristocratic descent, is the heiress of a quarter of a million in her own right, and I have promised her hand, when she is of age, to the son of a French count."

Donald winced as if struck a hard blow, but quickly recovered his composure.

"I have but a few thousand," he said, in slow, firm notes, and his splendid form straightened to its full dignity, "but I would have you understand, sir, that my father is an American gentleman. A French snob——"

"Enough of these insults," interrupted Mr. Steel, his voice quivering with passion. "You quit our employ, and your attention to my niece at once."

Donald's eyes flashed as he looked steadily into the orbs of his employer, and the heaving of his breast showed the passion he was striving to subdue.

"Will you allow me a few minutes' conversation with Lettice—with your niece?" he asked, pathetically.

"Not a second," returned the other, firmly.

"Hold!" he commanded, as the young man turned to depart. "If you will promise not to write to her, you can have thirty minutes' conversation."

Young Courtney's mind was in a confused jumble as he endeavored to reason out the most plausible course of action. He realized the full scope of this merciless proposition, and was too honorable to break it if accepted.

"Gather your ideas quickly, young man," remarked Mr. Steel, looking at his watch, "two minutes' grace have gone."

"But, Mr. Steel——"

"Four minutes gone," dryly interrupted the other.

"I agree, despot," Donald cried hoarsely, and hurriedly left the room.

"Twenty-six minutes, and ten blocks to go," were the terrifying thoughts which tortured young Courtney's mind, as he ran to the coat room. Snatching his hat from a hook, he raced across the room and took the broad stairway five steps at a jump.

"Rock Island common off, Donald?"

"Atchison preferred advance ten points?" called some acquaintance who had passed him on the elevator.

What cared he for the advance or decline of stocks! It was a mere bagatelle compared with his race against time.

A glance at his watch as he reached the sidewalk showed that eight minutes of the precious time had expired.

Fortunately his car was just passing, and with a little run and spring he was on the rear

platform. He felt the agitation too greatly to take a seat, but was comforted with the thought that the electric car would soon reach his destination. He was carefully considering what was best to say, and how to say it, in the brief length of time which would be allowed him with his sweetheart, and the harrowing possibility that she might not be at home kept obtruding itself.

But all these thoughts were banished by the abrupt stopping of the car, which almost threw him from the railing.

Hastening to the front of the car Donald found a heavily loaded coal wagon broken down on the track.

CHAPTER II.

A RACE AGAINST TIME.

HAILING a passing hack he ran to its side, gave hurried direction for quick transit, together with an unusual fee, and sprang into the vehicle.

They were barely under good headway when a stop was made, and the young man dropped to the pavement and went forward to find the jehu with the fore leg of one of the animals between his knees.

"Beggin' yer honor's pardon, sir, but de nigh horse has half trowed a shoe, de blackguard," he exclaimed, twisting and tugging to wrench the few remaining obdurate nails from the hoof. "Be faith, 'n' we'll be off like a straik of lightnin' in a minute."

Donald groaned as a glance at his watch in-

dicated that but fifteen minutes of valuable time remained.

"Hey, there!" exclaimed a voice behind him, and young Courtney turned to find the nose of a horse almost against his face.

The animal was drawing a light, grocery delivery wagon, and a boy perched on its high seat had shouted the warning.

Donald stepped aside, and as the wagon passed a thought entered his mind which was put into instant execution. With a quick step and spring he vaulted safely into the rear of the moving wagon. Noting his strange action the driver called:

"Hey, mister, yer wanter fall outen there, 'n' do it quick!"

Donald gave the order no heed, but continued to carefully pick his way over the boxes of eggs and baskets of groceries to the driver's seat.

"What do ye want?" inquired the latter.

"I want you to take me to—Lafayette Avenue, quick as possible."

"Well, I like yer nerve," bridled the delivery boy. "'N' I'll do nuthin' o' ther kind."

Courtney placed his hand on the driver's

shoulder, and with a look which plainly showed the earnestness of his determination, remarked with startling severity:

"Ten dollars if you do so voluntarily. I shall throw you into the street and take charge of the horse if you refuse."

"The tenner's mine, old chum. Get a move on, old Never Curried, here's beatin' Lou Dillon's 1:58 1-2," he shouted, bringing the lines down on the animal's back with vigor.

Donald glanced at his watch, as the wagon swayed from side to side, in the mad race. Ten minutes of the allotted time remained. At this, and with no farther mishap his destination should be reached in little less than five minutes.

Around corners and over street car tracks they swung and rattled, the grocery boy laying on the whip as though it were an ambulance on a quick call, he was driving. Then with a sharp turn he brought the animal onto its haunches in front of Mr. Steel's residence.

Donald threw him a bill, and springing from the wagon ran up the walk and ascended the marble steps.

"Where is Lettice?" he cried, so vehemently to the maid whom he met in the hall, that she started back in alarm, but indicated the parlor.

Mr. Steel's niece was seated at the piano, but rose at the sound of his hasty arrival.

She was truly a handsome girl, with large, expressive blue eyes, a broad, intelligent brow, and an abundance of wavy chestnut hair.

"Donald!" she exclaimed, tremulously, as he entered the parlor. "What is it—my uncle——"

"Yes, your uncle," he interrupted, bitterly. "But we have only one minute's time, sweetheart——"

"But my poor uncle," she broke in. "Oh, Donald, tell me the worst."

"Perdition seize your uncle! Oh, Lettice, listen to me," he added, beseechingly, as she started back at the vehemence of his language.

But at this instant, the silvery tones of the little French clock on the mantel chimed out the last second of his time limit.

His face paled as the full significance of his position flashed upon him.

Lettice stood before him in an attitude of expectancy, her large blue eyes open to their

fullest extent with wonder, and her beautifully curved lips quivering.

An instant he paused, regarding this beautiful choice of his affection, with Cupid discharging every arrow from his quiver into his heart. Then, with a cry as of a soul tortured, he placed one hand before his eyes to ward off the great temptation, turned and almost staggered from the room.

One distressed cry of "Donald, oh, Donald!" was wafted to his ears as he descended the steps.

"He placed one hand before his eyes to ward off the great temptation."

CHAPTER III.

VILLAINY FRUSTRATED—A RICH BEQUEST.

DONALD COURTNEY was a young man of well-balanced mentality, and with sterling, honest uprightness of character. He would not have entertained a thought of unmanliness. He had all possible respect for the position of his employer, but his American spirit caused him to resent any interference which he deemed personal.

He was certainly right in the feeling that he had been treated in a most discourteous manner, that Mr. Steel had used his power of might to brush him aside with less compunction than he would feel in kicking a pauper from his pathway, and his soul was filled with a turmoil of indignation as he walked unsteadily away from the mansion.

How many of us, acting on the maxim of

"all is fair in love or war" would have followed the almost irresistible promptings of love's passion and taken this beautiful choice of his affection under the mantle of protection and bid defiance to the wishes or commands of kindred or king!

But while this greatest of temptations surged at his heart, his strong sense of conscientious integrity and inviolable regard for his word of honor caused him to put the pleasant morsel from his lips.

A short walk brought him to Lafayette Park. Entering the beautiful grounds, he took a shady seat near the artificial lake to ponder over his late experience.

The heat of passion had cooled, and the stern facts of the situation were before him. He felt that it was by no action of his that within an hour he had lost a good position and been denied the companionship of one whom he loved with all the ardor of his strong soul.

Not for an instant had the thought of giving her up at the command of an uncle entered his mind. He knew that Lettice possessed much spirit, and smiled at thoughts of the rebellion Mr. Steel would encounter when he

endeavored to bend her will to his plans. He realized that in one year she would reach her majority, and he entertained no apprehension as to being disqualified in the race for her preference.

He had several thousand dollars in bank, but was ambitious to gain a sum sufficient to place them on a level with the society in which they moved. The fact that but one year's time remained for the acquirement, prodigious undertaking, did not appall or dishearten him. It must be done; how it could be accomplished he left for farther consideration.

Arising from the seat with the satisfied air of one whose mind had reached a definite conclusion he left the park and took an outbound car.

Leaving the latter at the outskirts of the city, Donald entered a neat cottage which was the residence of his sister, to whom he had always gone with questions of importance.

The balance of the day and evening was passed in council as to his future, and he started on a return to the city with a renewed determination of spirit to win in the life game of hearts. He alighted from the car at Frank-

lin Avenue, and the night being mild and pleasant, strolled out onto the great Eads bridge to commune alone over the day's eventful happenings.

He had taken a seat in the darkened portion of an alcove, and was regarding the ever-interesting array of lights which glimmer along the levee front with procession-like glow, when the strange actions of several men who were approaching on the bridge sidewalk attracted his attention.

Two of them were supporting a third person, who seemed either under the influence of liquor or in a stupor. They paused a short distance from Donald, and a scuffle ensued.

Young Courtney hesitated about meddling in possibly a drunken wrangle until a choked appeal for help was heard. Without any hesitancy he left his place of concealment and sprang toward the ruffians.

One of the number was being borne on the shoulders of his companions, their evident intentions being to cast him over the guard rail of the bridge into the black, boiling depths of the river.

Their first knowledge of any interference

with their murderous intentions was a blow from Donald's fist, which felled one of the ruffians, and the victim dropped heavily to the walk.

The fallen thug quickly regained his feet, and was preparing for a joint attack with his companion, when the sound of hastily approaching footsteps caused them to beat a hurried retreat toward the east end of the bridge.

A bridge patrolman arrived at this instant and Donald explained the situation so far as he had knowledge of the fact, and they turned their attention to the victim of the murderous assault.

"That was certainly a close call," remarked the young man as he lifted the prostrate man's head on his knee.

"'N' I hev' ye ter thank fer outwittin' the thavin' Ombrays, stranger," returned the injured man, in low, deep tones.

"Did they rob you?" inquired the officer, who waited by his side.

"Got 'bout 'er thousand, I guess. But hold on, Mr. Officer," he added as the latter arose and started toward the eastern end of the bridge. "Guess ye better get a doctor,

an' get his pronto; fer they give me erbout six inches uv steel atween the shoulders that'll send me over the Great Divide, I reckon."

The officer hurried away to turn in a call for the ambulance.

Donald carefully examined the injured man and found, as he judged, a deep knife cut between the shoulder blades. He gave the wound all the attention at his command.

From inquiries he learned the stranger's name to be Milt Connor, that he had been a successful miner in the West, and was visiting St. Louis to "have a time."

With a chance acquaintance he had indulged in liquor pretty freely. His companion proved to be one of the thugs whose pleasing address enabled them to ensnare their trusting victim to destruction.

Young Courtney was becoming deeply interested in his companion's recital of his Western life when the ambulance arrived, and Connor was lifted into the vehicle.

Donald had bade him good-bye with a word of cheer, and would have held back, but Connor clung to his hand and firmly requested that he accompany them.

The city dispensary was soon reached, and the wound given careful attention.

Young Courtney remained in the reception room until one of the surgeons made his appearance. To his anxious inquiry the latter stated that the knife thrust would prove fatal, and that Connor had but a short time to live. Farther, that he had requested Donald's presence at once.

As Donald came to the injured man's side the latter asked that they be left alone.

A weak smile lit up the rugged-toned features as he drew up a chair beside the sufferer.

"Wall, pardner," he said, with much effort, "Milt Connor has got his last grub stake. Ye hev' done me a favor, an' I'll make yer fortin. I hev' been working a secret mine alone in the Thunder Mountains——"

The miner had grown weaker, which showed plainly that internal hemorrhage was fast sapping his life. His words were spoken with great difficulty, and Donald bent closer to catch the whisper.

"Right behind the Silver Cascade is pan dirt that'll make yer rich—rich——"

Donald placed his ear close to the lips the

better to catch farther words of the strange story, but only an unintelligible mutter was heard, followed by a silence which plainly evidenced the end of another life.

Donald passed from the room, and leaving his card, with instructions for the interment of his late strange acquaintance, at his expense, left the dispensary.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE'S ASSURANCE—PLANS DISCUSSED.

DONALD COURTNEY had a roommate named Bob Martin. They were joint tenants of a cosy suite of rooms in a fashionable bachelor apartment on Vine Street.

Although the hour was late when Donald let himself into their quarters with a latchkey he found his chum waiting his return.

Bob Martin was a big-bodied, whole-souled, big-hearted fellow; "Lazy Bob" his friends called him. He had inherited a large fortune, which enabled him to live his careless, inactive life. His manliness and other sterling characteristics were so marked that everyone liked and respected him.

"Well, old chum," drawled he, shifting his position on the rich davenport, as he removed a French briar pipe from his lips, "haven't fallen into late hours, have you?"

"I have had a day and night of exciting experience, Bob, and am tired out," replied Courtney, dropping into an easy-chair with a sigh of relief.

"And indeed you look it, old man. What is the trouble?"

"I have been discharged from the employ of Steel and Bland."

"Incredible!" ejaculated the other, now all attention.

Donald gave a full, detailed account of the unfortunate conference between Mr. Steel and himself, and the events up to the parting with his sweetheart.

"You were going some, old man," laughed Bob, referring to the latter's exciting ride. "And you did just right."

"Rather, I was trying to go, but failed," returned Courtney, lugubriously.

"Oh, by the way," remarked Martin, "a district messenger boy left a missive here for you early in the evening; it is there on the center table."

Donald picked up the envelope and hastily broke the seal, and hurriedly read over the closely written page. The sparkle in his black

eyes indicated that its contents gave him pleasure. He was deeply buried in thought as he sat closely regarding the open page in his hand.

"It must look good to you, Don," remarked his companion, after some little time. "Pass around the gladness."

Courtney arose to his feet, and handing the letter to his friend, leaned against the mantel while the latter perused the page.

" 'Dear Donald,'—Whew!" he commented, as the contents of the letter were read aloud, "your steady has it bad, old comrade.—'I have learned of your sacrifice in order to see me and my love for your manly action is increased an hundred fold, if the addition were possible. My uncle has informed me of his intentions with regard to the count, but will learn that it will not count with me.'—Good pun," snorted Bob. " 'No combination of circumstances can change my regard for you. In one year's time I shall be of age, and then I am yours to command. We go to Europe for a tour of the Old World, and to meet the countship, I presume, but have no fear.' Say, Don," he remarked, returning the letter, "that Lettice

Steel is a brick. What are you going to do about it?"

"I shall make her my wife," replied Courtney, firmly.

"Bravo! If I had half your spirit there might have been an addition to the Benedict ranks long ago. But, ah me!" he sighed, dropping back into an easy position. "Just think of dancing close attendance to a whimsical bunch of mull and laces for a season and 'Mr. Martin will be delighted, I know, to row us up the Mississippi River a mile,' on a hot night. Or, 'Bob will carry the lunch baskets,' for a mile, with the thermometer at 100, play Copenhagen or swing a one hundred and sixty pound bunch of sweet femininity for an hour in the broiling hot sun. Oh, Don! the very thought is exhaustive. No matrimony for yours truly."

Courtney smiled at his friend's lugubrious sayings, well knowing that they lacked entire sincerity.

He then recited the stirring events which had occurred during his acquaintance with Milt Connor.

"Could not this Silver Cascade gold mine

story be the chimerical result of his booze, or fever from the injury?" questioned Bob.

"The circumstances surrounding his death and intelligent earnestness of the recital confirm me in the probity of his story, and I shall give it investigation," replied Courtney, positively.

"You will go to Idaho to verify your judgment?"

"My convictions warrant the action."

"Then you can count yours lazily in the pilgrimage, if acceptable."

"If you will accompany me, Bob," questioned the other eagerly, "half the find shall be yours."

"Not a penny of it, Don. I will attend just for the sport."

"I should desire no other companion, Bob. We will purchase our outfit and set out at once."

The two companions talked over their coming mining venture to a late hour.

CHAPTER V.

LAST CHANCE—ROUGHING IT.

THE sharp, pistol-like crack of a long whip at the heads of its leaders as the tired animals slowly dragged a heavy stage coach over a rough mountain road, followed later by a sharp application of the brakes as it swung from side to side down a narrow gulch and entered a broad valley.

The Dixie stage had almost reached its terminus, to the relief of its passengers, and a certainly satisfactory anticipation of the jaded horses, as they voluntarily started forward in a canter, which soon brought the vehicle in front of a long wooden structure. The building, known as the Last Chance, was the only hotel in Dixie.

"All out, Bob," remarked one of the only two occupants of the stage, as it came to a stop. "I suppose this is Dixie."

"I sincerely hope so," returned his companion, dismally. "And I was just thinking that Artemus Ward must have got his inspiration for his stage coach subject, after a sixty-mile ride between Stites and Dixie, Courtney."

"You would not enthusiastically recommend an Idaho stage as a conveyance of comfort?"

"Indeed, not to a friend," returned the other, as they reached the ground.

"This way, gents," interrupted the stage driver, as he gathered up some of their luggage. "Guess we're not too late fer a feed."

They ascended a few steps to a porch which extended the entire front of the building.

A number of rough looking, red-shirted men had come out of the building to meet them, the burliest of whom relieved the stage driver of his traps.

"Howdy, Hank!" he said, in tones as deep and rough as the growl of a bulldog. "Be faith 'n' yer a trifle late."

"Yep, Colonel. 'N' dusty an' dry down ter my in'ards."

"Step right in, me coveys. Supper'll be comin' in a blissid minute. An' bedad, I hav some

rale mountain dew that'll make ye think yer ther prisident uv the United States in ten blissid minutes."

They were ushered into an apartment which evidently comprised both the office and bar-room of the Last Chance.

A long, heavy, oak counter extended one side of the room. This evidently comprised the entire fixtures of the bar, at least all that was visible, if we might except the frame of a small mirror, whose glass, from the number of bullet holes in the thin wood back, had evidently long since been shot out by promiscuous revolver practice.

As Colonel Hogan passed around the farther end of the bar he pushed aside some gunny bags which draped an opening into a long, dark corridor, and, in a voice which made the windows rattle, shouted:

"Wake up thar, Woo Chung, ye lazy haythen, 'n' get those Ombrays some chuck. 'N' do et pronto, er be pipe uv St. Peter, I'll hang ye wid yer own pigtail." After having given the order for the evening meal in such vigorous tones, the broad-shouldered landlord

brought from beneath the counter a two-gallon jug and three tin cups.

"Shure, 'n' I know yer failin', Hank," he remarked in tones which he tried to make pleasant, as the driver eagerly seized one of the cups and tipped the jug until he filled it, and the full measure of fiery liquor was poured down his throat without the bat of an eye.

"It ain't the amount ye drink, Hank," continued Hogan, watching the driver's libations with every degree of pleasure, "but how much good it do yer."

"Will ye's liquor, gents?" he inquired, pushing the cups toward the young men.

But both Donald and Martin declined the proffer and turned their attention to the surroundings.

Following out the line they had decided on in making a test of Milt Connor's statement with regard to the Silver Cascade gold mine, they had reached this far in their journey.

The occupants of the room were a fair sample of the crowd which are to be met in the bar-room of any Western mining town.

Through clouds of rank tobacco smoke were men seated at the tables playing cards with

half a dozen onlookers watching the games. They were a rough-looking lot indeed, some were prospectors, who spend the best years of their lives vainly looking for the "lucky strike" which will bring the financial world to their feet.

You wonder how the prospector manages to subsist? I will digress sufficiently to answer the question. In all fairly rich mining localities are firms, generally supply keepers, who furnish the prospectors tools and victuals free. This is called a "grub stake." If the prospector is fortunate and locates a paying mine, fifty per cent. of the output goes to the person who furnished the grub stake. The two companions felt that some of this class composed the crowd before them, but probably the larger proportion were laborers in the large quartz crushing mill that was located at this point.

Both Donald and his companion were equipped in every way to be independent of outside assistance. They were now near the North Fork of the Salmon river, right in the foothills of Thunder Mountain, in the gold

country. From Dixie their journey must be continued either on horseback or afoot.

They were ready to accept any condition of affairs which might tend to the successful fruition of their plans, be it perilous or otherwise.

Both were cool and deliberate, and while Bob Martin's broad, muscular shoulders and cleverness in the manly art, had gained him the respect and the admiration of many of the pugilists of note, with whom he had met in friendly bouts at the gymnasium, Donald's proficiency as a rifle and revolver shot placed him at the head of the list in the target room.

"The levee front is tame in comparison with the tough element of this country, eh, Bob?" remarked Donald, as they took in the scene before them.

"Yes, and like McDougal's alley, the farther you go, the rougher and tougher it gets."

CHAPTER VI.

ROUGH-HOUSE—TENDERFEET—A BAD MAN HUMILIATED.

THEIR attention was now drawn to the outside of the building, where two horsemen had just alighted and the clang, clang of heavy spurs could be heard, as one of them ascended the steps.

Pausing in the doorway he gazed around at the occupants of the room.

His heavily jawed, disfigured face and bull neck were set on a herculean body which had evidently at one time possessed great strength.

Turning his bloodshot eyes savagely around over the occupants of the room, he bellowed:

"Why, boys! Ye all know me. I'm Black Pine Pete of the old 1851 camp. An' jest natchely pinin' fer a scrimmage. Any ye Dixieites wanter 'commodate me, see?" Black

Pine Pete's prowess as a rough and tumble fighter was well known in that locality, and it was considered a pretty safe proposition to let him alone.

Many of the occupants of the room, although visibly annoyed at the defi, schooled their feelings of resentment, while some of a timid nature, endeavored to "get next" to his good-will with salutations of "Howdy, Pete. That's right."

"Wall, if yer too cowardly ter fight, I'll liquor.

"Hello, Colonel," called the bully, striding up to the bar with a swagger, "trot out that jug uv mountain dew thet hev' never revenue——"

"Pete," interrupted Hogan, glancing at the strangers with a worried look.

Black Pine Pete turned toward Donald and Bob, and regarded them wickedly for a moment.

"Bald knob 'uv Thunder Mountain!" he howled, "this is more satisfaction than strikin' a vein uv pay dirt. Two nice young tenderfeet, 'n' jest pinin' fer a difikilty. Whoope and alaman left!"

"Pass it up, Pete," growled Hogan. "Be faith, 'n' they do bees guests uv me hotel. The gents'll no doubt set 'em up."

"Say, Mr. Man," the bully leered, stepping in front of Bob, "will yer pay ther liquor fer the house er take a lickin'?"

"If you are addressing me," remarked young Martin, his lips curled in a half sneer, as he looked into his questioner's eyes with cool determination, "I can assure you that none of my money will be spent on you or your friends, you big, bloated, blustering bully!"

"Buckin' bronchos!" howled Pete, glancing around the room. "Did I hear aright, fellers? Me, the best man in Thunder Mountain. Why, I'll jest hammer him ter pieces!" The bully danced around the room in fury, and its other occupants fully expected there would be something doing at once.

"Skin yer fancy coat, pilgrim, fer I'm comin'," snarled Black Pine Pete, squaring himself.

"Come on, wind jammer," sneered Martin, without making a move toward defence, "and I will punch some of the conceit out of you."

"Wha—oop!" roared Pete, "here's er minute's exercise."

Crouching, with his head and thick neck drawn down into his shoulders à la Jeffries, he sprang forward, and his hamlike fist sent with a straight swing for Martin's face, but the latter's left neatly turned the blow aside and the right shot forward, landing on the ruffian's mouth and nose with a smack that could have been heard half a block.

As Black Pine Pete staggered back, Bob sprang forward, and planted both a heavy right and left swing on the point of jaw, and the bully dropped limply to the floor. In the parlance of the ring, he not only "took the count," but "passed into queer land."

The encounter had brought Martin to the center of the room, where he stood closely regarding his fallen foe.

At the commencement of hostilities Donald had drawn his revolver partly from his belt, and cast his eyes furtively about to guard against treacherous interference.

As Black Pine Pete went down, his companion appeared in the doorway. Drawing a long, murderous knife from his belt, he raised

it aloft, intending to spring forward and plunge it into young Martin's back.

He was making the spring when the sharp report of a revolver rang out, and several fingers followed the knife into the air. As the latter turned to descend to the floor, another shot followed, the bullet of which struck the knife's guard, driving the weapon into the wooden wall, where it remained quivering. As the knife was shot from his grasp, the murderous villain gave a howl of pain and dashed from the room.

In a short time Black Pine Pete regained consciousness, and began to look around bewildered. "Buckin' burros!" he exclaimed, rising to a sitting position, "did er bolt uv lightnin' strike me?"

"You will think it sharper than a flash of lightning if you show your ugly face around here again," remarked Bob.

With this admonition he easily lifted the form of the burly ruffian above his head, walked to the door, and pitching him out on to the hard roadway, calmly turned to Hogan with the question:

"Is our supper ready, landlord?"

Colonel Hogan's gaze wandered from the doorway to the knife in the wall and then to the two young men with dumbfounded astonishment.

"Well, be the Holy Virgin!" he exclaimed, "who the divil be ye?"

"We are travelers and very hungry," evaded Bob.

" 'N', be the holy pipe uv St. Patrick, I'll murther that haythen ef yer supper is not ready at this blissid minute," Hogan exclaimed, hurrying from the room. A noise like that of a rough-house was heard from a distant part of the building, followed by a human cry of distress, and Hogan appeared with the announcement that the meal was ready. After removal of the travel dust by a good wash in a cool spring, the young men entered the dining-room, and to their surprise, were seated to an excellent supper.

Their being alone at this repast was explained by the statement of Hogan, that the stage driver had joined with the town's citizens in a jamboree celebration at the ignominious downfall of Black Pine Pete.

"Woo Chung," called the Colonel, as he left

the room, "serve these gents, er I'll give yer 'nuther batin'." As he disappeared in the hallway, a little Chinaman entered the room.

A limp in his walk and pained expression on his face, showed the rough treatment he had lately passed through.

"Was the landlord abusing you?" inquired Donald in kind tones.

The Chinaman looked at him, surprised. This was probably the first word of kindness that he had received in years.

"Boss allee samee bad man," he replied, tremulously, casting an apprehensive glance toward the door; "him kick and beatte Woo Chung allee timee."

"And I shall give him a dose of his own medicine if he does it again," observed Bob, in a tone which left no doubt as to its earnestness.

"Here, Woo," said Donald, pitching a silver dollar, which the little fellow caught dexterously, "we will be your friends."

"Hi-yi," cried the Chinaman, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Chinaman allee samee glad, me like you allee light."

"Woo," continued Donald, in a low tone, as he drew the latter close to his chair, "are you acquainted with this country?"

"Woo Chung been all ovel Thundel Mountain."

"Do you know where the Silver Cascade is?"

"Yep. 'Bout twenty mile up mountain. Are you prospectors?"

"We are."

"Let Woo Chung go with you, señors?" inquired the Chinaman, eagerly. "Me washee and cook fol you."

"It would not be right for us to take you away from Hogan," protested Donald, but his most weighty reason was a disinclination to disclose their actions to a third person.

"Me lun 'way."

"What direction is the Silver Cascade, Woo?" he asked.

"It north, up trail."

Having finished their meal, the travelers sent word to Hogan that they were very tired and ready to retire.

Hogan answered in person. He was very anxious that they return to the bar-room to

meet the marshal and other distinguished citizens of the town, who desired to become acquainted with the persons who had so quickly defeated and humiliated a terror of Black Pine Pete's standing.

"In fact," insisted the Colonel, "the bhoys bees mellowing up fast, an', bedad, sor, there's nothin' too good fer ye's. An' faith, a hot time there'll be in Dixie this night in ye's honor, sirs."

Donald realized that the friendship of these people was not to be despised, but neither Martin or he had any thought or desire to engage in a night's carouse. But deeming it best to be pacific, he laid his hand familiarly on Hogan's shoulder, with the remark:

"Please inform these good people they must excuse our presence to-night, as we are almost too tired to stand, and must have rest.

"And, Colonel," he added, "while we shall, no doubt, make Dixie our headquarters for some time, we are prospectors. We wish to commence our work at once, and will trouble you to purchase us two good horses and a pack mule. Now, if you will kindly direct us to our room, we will retire."

"Right this way, gents. Be faith, 'n' there's nothin' too good fer ye," returned the Colonel, fawningly, as he led the way into a fairly furnished room off the hallway. "An' sure, the best bastes to be had in the town will be waitin' yer honors in the morning." Despite the noise of revolver shots and whoops which continued during the night's celebration, the young men were soon asleep and did not awake until the call for a late breakfast.

CHAPTER VII.

CHINK'S MISHAP—A RICH GOLD MINE.

A NEW face served the meal, and knowing glances passed between Donald and his companion when it was explained that the Chinaman had decamped during the night.

The town marshal and several citizens proffered congratulations at being rid of a town pest, and explained that the former bad man had sneaked away as soon as able to move.

The animals, apparently of good quality, were ready, and purchased by Donald at a low figure. In fact, he had to decline them as a present.

The burro was loaded with implements and such provisions as would be needed, and, after a hearty handshake with their new-made friends, the journey over the north trail, up into Thunder Mountain, was begun.

They had proceeded probably half a dozen miles when a "ki-yi" was heard ahead, and the little Chinaman stepped into the trail.

"Buenos dias, Señors," he cried in Spanish and pigeon English. "Me allee samee sklip lout Poco tiempo."

Donald and Martin laughed heartily at the grotesque actions of Woo Chung, as he danced and capered around them.

"What are you going to do now?" queried Bob.

"Allee samee go with Mellicans."

"But if we do not want you?"

Woo Chung's sallow face took a deeper shade of yellow, in fact, he presented the most woebegone appearance they had ever beheld.

"Oh, let the yellow heathen go, Bob. He will bring us luck."

"See, muncho bueno, Señor Bob," interrupted the Chink, eagerly. "Washee, cookee, and bling good luckee."

"All right, Woo," smiled Courtney. "Up on that burro with you quick, and let's be moving."

Woo Chung climbed into a shelf of rock, almost before the permission.

A momentary pause and then without a thought of the possible consequence, he sprang through the air like a flying squirrel and lit astride of the burro's back.

His muleship had been standing with head and ears drooped down until they almost reached the trail, his eyes closed, either in meditation or sleep, but the instant that the Chinaman's short legs came in contact with his back, there was something doing in the fullest sense of the word.

Emitting a bray that rolled and rumbled through the canyons and defiles of Thunder Mountain, and caused energetic actions on the part of the prospectors to keep their mounts from bolting, the burro crouched and then jumped humpbacked into the air with a buck which sent a tangled mass of cooking utensils, provisions and Chinaman into the trail ahead of him.

Woo Chung slowly untangled himself and rose to his feet.

The prospectors laughed heartily, as the strange mixture dropped in a tangled mess in the trail.

"What bloke loosee?" inquired Woo, one

hand rubbing his head and the other his shin.

"Get up, Woo," laughed Don, reloading the animal, "we will introduce you to his burro-ship, and everything will go all right."

The entire party were soon riding slowly up the mountain trail, Woo Chung acting as guide. All day long the prospectors pushed their animals up the circuitous mountain trail, and as they ascended the four thousand feet elevation of Thunder Mountain, the rough scenery grew grand beyond all expression. They skirted a high peak on a pathway which was so narrow as to require them to proceed single file, and entered a narrow valley, at one side of which swirled and pitched a narrow stream, dancing and plunging in its mad journey to join the north fork of Salmon river.

"Allee samee stop here for night," remarked Woo Chung, dropping from the burro's back.

"How much further is it to the Cascade?" inquired Donald.

"Little way, but allee samee bad road and night come quick. No evening in mountain."

The companions had confidence in their guide's experience and were not loath to take the rest which their surroundings offered.

While Donald picketed the animals and Woo Chung gathered wood for a fire, Bob joined the sections of a pole together, and fastening a fly on his hook proceeded down stream until a small pool was found, made a cast for a troll and in a short time had landed several fine mountain trout.

They were provided with all necessary camp utensils and the little Mongolian soon had an appetizing spread before them. It was hardly finished when the sun disappeared behind a mountain peak, and the valley was instantly enveloped in a cloak of intense, impenetrable blackness.

"As dark as the gloomy cavern underground through which the shades had to walk in their passage to Hades," quoth Bob, as they rolled themselves in their blankets.

Both young men were awakened by the call of Woo Chung in the morning, and found a good meal of breakfast bacon, eggs, trout and coffee awaiting them. The meal over, Woo Chung explained that their destination was but a short distance up the stream, but must be made on foot. The Mongolian led the way up the steep, rocky, narrow canyon,

closely followed by his earnest companions. As they toiled onward and upward over the rough stair of nature, the sound of a cataract grew louder, and a turn around a high abutment of rock brought them to the foot of a veritable miniature Niagara. Their further progress was blocked by a solid sheet of water which poured like a bright curtain of silver from a fissure a hundred feet above.

"Allee samee Silver Cascade, señor," exclaimed Woo Chung, addressing young Courtney, whom he recognized as the leader of the party.

"Magnificent!" cried Donald.

"It is well worth the trip," returned Bob.

"Woo," inquired Donald, "has anyone ever ventured behind that cataract?"

"No can say, señor, except allee samee get wet if try it."

"Here goes, Bob," remarked young Courtney, drawing close and to one side of the cataract, until the spray sprinkled him plentifully.

"Better wait until I bring the rubber suits," admonished his companion. But the next instant Donald had made a duck and sprung forward. For a moment, the weight of the fall-

ing sheet of water threatened to hurl him back, and then his form disappeared behind its curtain. After about ten minutes' time, young Martin sought a position near the falls and loudly hallowed.

"I am all right, Bob," returned a voice, hardly discernible above the roar of the cataract.

"Do you want a light?"

"Have a torch, and it appears just as Connor claimed. Wait for me." Probably half an hour's time had passed when a form was seen to quickly emerge from the sheet of water, and there was Donald, wet to the skin.

Donald deemed it best not to comment on his discovery in the presence of the little Chink. On returning to the camp, he made a change of clothing, and in the meantime the Mongolian had gone in quest of a mess of mountain trout.

"How did you find it?" inquired Bob, with much concern.

"In this manner," replied Courtney, handing him several samples of quartz which showed a very rich per cent. of gold.

"Why, Don, this is a veritable fountain of

the wealthy Jew of Jerusalem," remarked the other, the unsteadiness of his voice showing his deep interest. "How much is there of it?"

"There seems to be a rich, heavy vein of the ore which has been fairly commenced by Milt Connor."

"What action are you going to take in the matter?"

"First, we will stake the claim. A rough plan of it, together with the ante-mortem statement of Milt Connor shall be filed legally at once, and then we will develop it with the best modern machinery."

"My idea exactly," commented Bob, enthusiastically. "The Chink need know nothing about the matter until the claim is legally filed, but I think best to keep him with us until that action is accomplished."

Several days were spent in mountain climbing and measurement, and a full inspection was made around and into the cave under the falls; plans were sketched for the use of machinery in future work, and the three then started on their long return journey to make preparations to begin work.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEEP ANXIETY—A NIGHT RIDE.

Six months later, the picturesque, quiet valley below the Silver Cascade falls, was a scene of bustle and activity. The heavy fall of water furnished power for handling a trolley which conveyed the rich gold-bearing quartz to a point where it could be hauled to a smelter and stamp mill, also the heavy drills and an electric dynamo which lighted the valley and mine where men worked shifts day and night. The publicity of their rich acquirement had caused a wide flurry and excitement. Many tempting offers had been made the young men, but all propositions had been declined. The rich output of the "Milt Connor," as they had christened the mine, was making them millionaires at a rapid rate, but its importance did not flurry or excite them to any

greater extent than the handling of any other business transaction.

A commodious structure built apart from the other buildings, and used for their office and residence, was in charge of the faithful Woo Chung.

Night had fallen over the valley but arc lights entirely dispelled the darkness. Young Courtney had made his evening visit to all parts of the works, and was seated in their luxuriously furnished lounging-room reading. Bob had gone to Dixie on business and was expected at any moment. Presently his familiar step was heard and he entered the room.

"Everything all right, Don?" he questioned, tossing a bundle of letters, magazines and papers on the center table.

"Everything moving smoothly," replied the other, carelessly sorting the pile of letters.

"By the way, Don, did old man Steel have any mining properties in this country?"

"Yes, sir, I remember handling the papers relating to his Idaho mines shortly before I left his employ." The latter part of the speech was drawn out in a disinterested manner, as he hastily opened one of the letters, the

contents of which seemed to blot out all surroundings.

"Do you remember the man's name who had it in charge?" Young Martin was compelled to repeat the question with some show of austerity.

"Oh, bother, Bob, what is it?" ejaculated the other, "what do I care for Steel or his mines? The returns were all calls for assessment."

"What was his mine manager's name?"

"Bradford Hillrung."

"You remember Black Pine Pete who entered into a one-sided argument with me at Dixie?" Don nodded smilingly as the events of the "argument" came to his mind.

"I met the terror at Dixie to-day. He was exceedingly mellow and exceedingly friendly. In a burst of confidence and braggadocio he stated that he was a side partner of Brad Hillrung, and that they had just pulled off a scheme which would line their pockets, when they would decamp for Arizona."

"Possibly Steel has threatened investigation and after making a heavy clamp at the mine they will leave for other parts," remarked

Donald, choosing another letter which he proceeded to open.

"I hope that it is no worse," reflected the other, leaning back in an easy-chair and lazily watching the rings of smoke from a fragrant Havana curl and circle to the ceiling. His sojourn in the bachelor's dreamland was suddenly cut short by a sharp ejaculation from his companion.

"What is it, Donald?" he inquired, eagerly, brought to his feet by the other's unusual show of excitement.

"I have a letter here from Lettice," he replied in unsteady tones, holding the sheet before him with nervous hand. "They had just returned from abroad, and her uncle would soon start for Idaho, to investigate some trouble with his mines, and she had asked to accompany him on the journey. As this letter is over two weeks old," he continued, vehemently, "they may have reached Thunder Mountains, and my sweetheart be in the power of such ruffians as Black Pine Pete."

"I trust not," replied Bob, trying hard to hide his apprehension from his friend, "but

I am ready to assist in any suggestion you have in mind."

"Then have two good horses saddled—make it three," he corrected; "we will have Woo accompany us, for he knows the mountain trail like an Indian."

They were soon in the saddle and urging their mounts to their best efforts down the mountain trail. They were well armed and were fully determined to push their investigations in any manner that the circumstances should demand.

It was midnight when they reached Dixie. The noisy uproar in the "Last Chance," demonstrated the fact that there was "something doing" at Colonel Hogan's bar. The young men did not deem it prudent on this occasion to make their presence known at this time. Dropping to the ground, Bob handed the rein of his horse to his companion, and directing him to move farther along in the darkness, drew near the building to inspect its inmates.

"We are in luck!" he exclaimed, on joining them in a few minutes. "Black Pine Pete is there; he seems to be flush with money, and is spending it lavishly on the crowd; has about

all the mountain dew he can carry, and I should infer from his remarks that he must quit them."

"What course do you suggest?" inquired Donald, eagerly.

"Wait his departure and follow him."

Young Courtney was very impatient to be making some more active effort, which would dispel the direful forebodings which were burning him up, as it were, but acceded to his friend's advice. Bob endeavored to pacify him with the probability that Lettice had not accompanied her uncle on the trip, but the other took the effort at reconciliation with but poor grace.

"Hi! Yi!" interrupted the Chink, "allee samee there come bad man."

The information was proven the next minute by a loudly bellowed, "Wha—oop! I'm ther toughest catermount what roams Thunder Mountain," and the terror was seen swaying back and forth in an effort to mount his bronco. "Go with me, nothin'," he thundered, riding off in the direction of Red River Meadows, and emphasizing the warning with a number of revolver shots in the air.

After the watchers had satisfied themselves that the ruffian was not followed by his late companions, they took up the trail in his rear. The sound of his horse's steps was sufficient to guide them, while they felt that the noise of their animals' movements would not be noticed by his liquor-dulled brain. This tracking was kept up for a number of miles when the full moon appeared and made their surroundings clearly discernible. At a word from young Martin, they drew rapidly, but quietly as possible, up onto their quest, one passing on either side. Black Pine Pete seemed wholly unconscious of their presence, and they discovered that he was leaning forward in a drunken sleep.

"Pete, wake up," demanded Bob, giving him a rough shake.

"I'm a—hic—howlin' terror," growled Black Pine Pete, making an effort to brace up, but only half awake.

Bob gave the tough a hard shake which almost unseated the ruffian and brought him to his right senses. Pete instinctively felt that he was not in the presence of friends, and

giving vent to a long string of threats and bravado half drew his weapon.

"Throw up your hands," thundered Donald.

The burly villain hesitated, but the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his temple caused him to quickly comply with the command. "Bind his hands behind him, Bob." When this was done they dismounted, and in no gentle manner lowered their captive to the trail, the animals being turned over to the care of Woo Chung.

"What ye mean by this funny play?" he growled, glaring from one to the other of his captors.

Donald stepped squarely in front of the ruffian, the moonlight showing the white hue of his countenance distinctly. "Black Pine Pete," he demanded, with abrupt and startling severity, "where are the old man and young lady you helped to abduct lately?"

The villain started in spite of himself, but quickly gaining control of himself, he set his jaws determinedly.

"Answer me at once."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout 'em," he replied, sullenly.

"Where is Brad Hillrung?"

"I ain't his keeper."

"Hold him at arm's length, Bob," said Donald.

His companion having complied with the request, young Courtney stepped off ten paces, turned about, and bringing his revolver to a line with the villain's head, remarked: "Now, Black Pine Pete, we have the best of proof that you had a hand in this abduction. I shall take three shots at you to force you to open up on this matter. The first will trim off a lock of hair, the second a piece of ear, and the third will put out your light. You know my ability as a marksman"—the sharp report of a revolver finished the sentence. Black Pine Pete dodged to one side, and a lock from his tangled head covering fell to the trail beside him. "One," called Donald, deliberately. Black Pine Pete was a bulldog by nature, but this was too much for any nerves.

"I cave, pardner," he cried.

"You will open up the whole plot?"

"Yep."

Bob and his companion were soon in possession of a black plot and its fruition, which made Donald almost wild with torment and anger.

"You will lead us to Brad Hillrung's retreat," he commanded, vehemently, "and at the first show of treachery I shall fill your worthless hide with lead."

CHAPTER IX.

HIGHWAYMEN—THE FRENCH COUNT'S COWARDICE.

As they gallop down the mountain trail, we will go back several days, and chronicle the experience of several characters who hold a by no means inconspicuous position in the annals of this narrative.

As the heavy overland express departed from Stites, three of the passengers followed the porter to the best hotel. Night had begun to envelop the rough surroundings in a mantle of darkness, and the travelers soon sought their respective rooms. It was learned that the stage was not due to leave for several days, and before retiring, one of the gentlemen, who seemed in charge of the party, engaged the services of a conveyance to start for Dixie early the following morning. He had hardly started

on his return to the hotel, when one of the loungers around the stable, a villainous-looking scoundrel, hastily saddled a bronco and galloped away over the trail which led to Thunder Mountain. After an early breakfast on the following morning, the party descended to the hotel veranda and entered a landau to which was hitched four serviceable-looking animals. The vehicle had a much-used appearance, but a glance would show that it had been built for rough mountain travel.

Two of the personages, Mr. Steel and his niece, Lettice, the reader is acquainted with. The third one of the party whose name was inscribed on the hotel register, "Count Felix Alvius, Bordeaux, France," was of medium height, but slender. His head was partly bald and his features small. A meager, lonesome mustache, either end of which was waxed to a needle-like point, adorned his thin lip.

"Allow me, *ma chère,*" he lisped, dancing down the veranda steps and handing Lettice to the vehicle. That she was not greatly pleased with this work of gallantry was evident by the poor grace of its acceptance, and if the Count was her uncle's choice of betrothal

and had been her companion while abroad, the wind blew the straws against his success.

The morning was mild and pleasant, and the top of the landau was thrown back. Lettice had taken a seat next to her uncle in the rear, while Count Felix sat facing them.

"Is not this scenery grand!" exclaimed she, enthusiastically, regarding the towering mountain peaks in the distance.

"Grand?" commented the Count, his mustache twitching with contempt, "what you call *ordinaire* I call—what compare to ze grand Alps of Switzerland. Is it not so, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh, cut it out!" angrily exclaimed Lettice, with American spirit and slang, and turned her back on him as much as their position would allow.

"Lettice," admonished Mr. Steel, rather sharply, "I certainly do not approve of such actions toward your affianced."

"Affianced, fudge——"

"That will do, girl," he interrupted, firmly. "I shall have the ceremony performed as soon as we can reach a clergyman."

For reasons of prudence and a desire to

gain time she had never offered open rebellion to the plans of her uncle, but had cleverly avoided any positive acceptance of his plans. The Count had treated her with ardent devotion, but she had artfully anticipated a dozen of his approaches to proposal. She instinctively felt that they were now drawing closer to the man who occupied her whole heart, but realized that it might be dangerous to their welfare to become too independent, and again resumed woman's best weapon—hypocrisy. Apparent good feeling was resumed between her and the Count, and the journey was continued with soft sayings of devotion on his part.

Stops were made at Elk City and Red River Meadows. The driver intended that they should reach Dixie early in the afternoon, but a breakdown delayed them several hours and nightfall found them ten miles from their destination. He seemed very much put out at their enforced delay, and his apparent restlessness caused Mr. Steel to inquire the cause.

"Are you not well acquainted with the road, and is it so dangerous?" inquired the latter.

Tuck Barnes was the extra stage driver, and

with the light from the side-lights of the landau, could have safely driven the whole distance in a gallop, but something of a weightier nature was causing him anxiety. "Thar have been some hold-ups in this neighborhood lately," he growled, " 'n' I don't want none uv it."

Mr. Steel was dazed for an instant with apprehension and alarm, but he felt that an appearance of indifference must be assumed in order to quiet any feelings of unrest or fright which the driver's blunt, terrifying statement might cause Lettice. "Are you afraid of the road agent?" he inquired, indifferently.

"No man has ever accused Tuck Barnes uv bein' a coward yet, sir," the driver drawled, as he pulled a Winchester from the boot of the landau and laid it alongside of him in the driver's box.

"Road agents?" inquired the Count. "Is zat zee American brigand?"

"All fancy," remarked Mr. Steel, indifferently. "The driver is gifted with a vivid imagination."

"Fear not, *ma chère* Lettice," cried the Count, pompously. "I am here. By Jove, I

ze neck of ze American brigand wring. I ask ze great *pleasiare.*"

Although the young lady felt that their situation must be insecure, she could hardly keep from shouting right out with laughter at her suitor's grandiloquence, which she felt fully convinced was ardent bravado. Mr. Steel opened a small suit case and selecting two revolvers, handed one to the Count.

"Ah, now I am prepare for ze *haute lutte,*" he exclaimed. "Let ze braivo——"

"Hands up," interrupted a deep-toned, rough voice at this instant, and a half dozen torches flashed into light on the sides of the narrow canyon through which they were passing. Each torch-bearer held a revolver pointed at the occupants of the landau. The face of each outlaw was entirely covered by a black mask. Two of the band seized the heads of the leaders, as a tall, heavy man, evidently the chief highwayman, jumped lightly into the road beside the vehicle. Tuck Barnes seemed dazed for an instant by the flash of light, and then quickly rising to his feet, threw the Winchester to his shoulder and brought it to bear on one of the men who were holding

the leaders. His action in making an effort to protect his passengers was wholly unexpected by the highwaymen, but the result of his good intention was cut off by a volley of revolver shots, and he pitched forward onto the ground. At the first flash of light, the valiant Count pushed his hands up into the air, and then to more strongly emphasize his willingness to obey the command of "hands up," he stood up in the landau, his limbs quaking so badly as to almost shake the vehicle.

"Hands up thar, pilgrim, or I'll bore ye," commanded the chief outlaw, covering Mr. Steel with a revolver.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" inquired the latter, in tones of anger which he tried hard to control.

"It means that ye will git out of thet hearse and ask no questions, if ye valley yer lives," returned the outlaw, gruffly.

Mr. Steel's Scotch blood was up, and there is no doubt but he would have tried conclusions with the band in the start, but for the presence of his niece. Feeling that any show of resistance would probably be retaliated by insult or injury to her, he slowly descended

to the ground and assisted Lettice to alight. After relieving Mr. Steel of his arms, he and his niece were led to one side of the road and left in charge of one of the outlaws.

"Well, Mr. Jack-in-the-box," called the leader to the Count, who had not moved from his first position, but stood with his arms raised to their highest extent, and fingers spread wide apart, "are you locoed? Climb down out of there, or I'll bore you," he thundered, turning his revolver in that direction.

Count Felix, with much trembling and delay complied, and staggered and almost collapsed with a vertigo of fear, as he stepped to the ground and joined his friends. Their presence seemed to give him momentary firmness. "I am ze French Count——"

"Shut up!" thundered the bandit captain, jerking a long, wicked-looking knife from his belt and taking a step forward, "or I will send yer all over the Divide!" Felix sprang behind Lettice as if seeking to use her person for a shield.

"Mon Dieu!" he whined, drawing as close to Miss Steel as possible. "Mr. Brigand, spare ze life of ze French Count, and——"

"Coward!" cried Lettice, vehemently, and, turning quickly, gave the craven wretch a quick push which caused him to measure his full length in the road.

"Well done, Lettice," said Mr. Steel, dryly.

"That's ther proper spirit, young lady," remarked the outlaw, laughing heartily at the Count's ignominious mishap. "Bind and blindfold them," he added, "for we must be moving."

Willing hands soon complied with his orders and the captives could feel that they had left the trail and were being led up over the foothills. For hours they trudged over the rough path until Lettice almost felt like giving up with fatigue. Finally they came to a pause, a sharp whistle was given and answered near by, and they passed on and entered what the captives deemed was the opening to a cave. A short distance farther on the captives were caused to make a sharp turn, entered a narrow niche, and were brought to a stop.

"This is your quarters for the present," remarked the outlaw, as he removed the cords from their arms and the bandages from their

eyes. "There is a second room for the lady. Good-night," he said, and passed into the outer cave. A lamp on a rude stand disclosed several piles of blankets. Onto one of these Count Felix threw himself without a word. He felt the disgrace of his cowardly action, and realized that his standing with both Mr. Steel and his niece had fallen very much below par.

CHAPTER X.

HELD FOR RANSOM—DONALD TO THE RESCUE—ADIEU, MADEMOISELLE.

Mr. Steel and Lettice passed into the other chamber of the cavern. It was well lighted by a hanging lamp, and showed by various indications that it had been hastily put into condition for her comfort. They looked carefully over the room until satisfied that there was no inlet except through the other room.

"Keep up a good cheer, Lettice," comforted her uncle, and kissing her good-night, went into the outer room.

At an early hour the following morning one of the outlaws, who was evidently the cook for the band, brought in a tray laden with a good, steaming breakfast. He was well masked, and performed the service without a word.

After the meal Mr. Steel was informed that the chief desired his presence at once. Following the guide, he was ushered into the outer cavern. On a raised platform sat the outlaw, surrounded by several of his band.

"Step forward and be seated," commanded that personage, in tones which were evidently intended to be imperative. "Without further delay," he added, and Mr. Steel noted that he had dropped the Western vernacular, "I shall state that you were kidnapped for the purpose of ransom. I am acquainted with the extent of your wealth and for the release of your party you must pay me $100,000. Will you do so?"

Mr. Steel paused, and with great control swallowed the pentup passion of rage and indignation which was boiling within him. He felt that a more pacific course must be pursued.

"Your request is irrational, sir," he calmly observed, "and your demand absurd."

The eyes of his captor could be seen to snap viciously through the holes in the black mask. "Unless you comply," the other rejoined, with abrupt and startling severity, "I shall bring

sorrow to you and yours. Ah!" he added, as though a new thought had entered his vile brain, "I shall make your beautiful niece my wife."

"You fiend!" cried Mr. Steel, hoarsely, but the other interrupted him:

"You can wire your St. Louis banker to express you the payment. That is my ultimatum. You can have forty-eight hours to think and talk the matter over. At the end of that time I will demand your answer." With a wave of his hand to indicate that the conference was at an end, two of the outlaws led Mr. Steel back to his room.

As soon as he recovered his composure, Mr. Steel requested further audience to inform the outlaw that his terms were accepted, but was informed that he must wait the forty-eight hours, and he passed the interim pacing the confines of his cell-like room like a caged animal. Count Felix had ventured a remark about the situation, but had been cut off with curt, short ceremony, which showed the great decline of his standing with Mr. Steel.

The time ordeal had passed and gone into another day's trial of uncertainty, when Mr.

Steel and his niece were requested to appear before the outlaw band. They were conducted to the outer cavern and seated before a rude table, behind which stood the outlaw chieftain. Pine-knot torches stuck in niches around the rocky chamber, lit up the surroundings with a sombre light, and disclosed the forms of a dozen black-masked freebooters occupying different positions around the room. They knew that the retreat was known only to the oath-bound members of the band, also that the approaches were well guarded, and for comfort had left their belts of arms on a shelf in another part of the building.

"Are you ready to comply with my request?" inquired the bandit, gruffly.

"I am ready to pay the ransom," replied Mr. Steel, firmly.

"Then sign this message," returned the other, pushing a Western Union blank and pencil toward him. "You can retire now," he said, as he slowly folded the signed telegram and placed it in his pocket.

Mr. Steel and his niece were just entering the opening to their rooms when the outlaw called to them to pause. "So long as I must

lose my prospective bride," he audaciously said, "I must kiss her good-night."

As the full purport of his scoundrelly remark was understood, Lettice uttered a suppressed scream and fled through the opening.

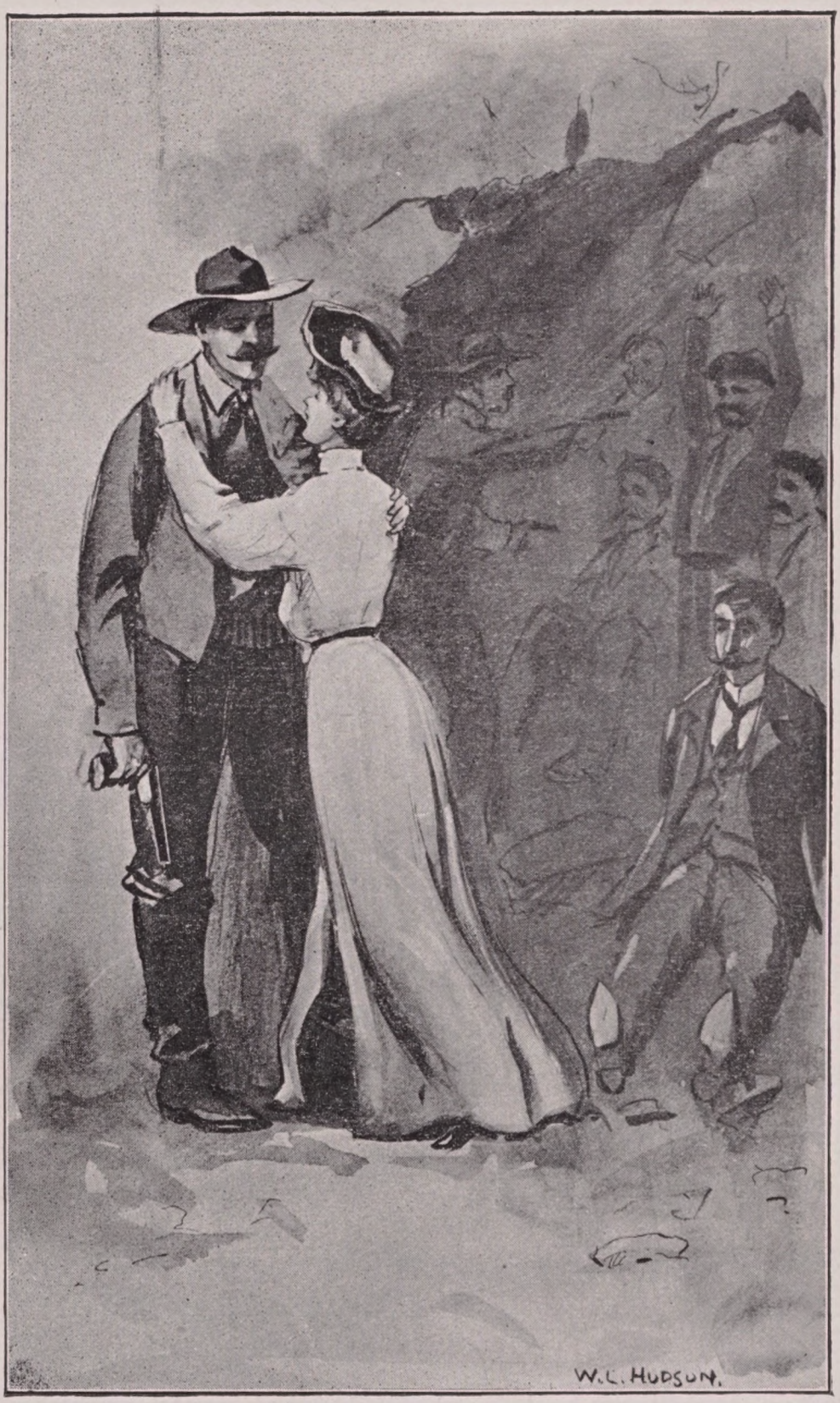
"You will have to pass over my dead body before you offer her such indignity!" exclaimed her uncle, barring the doorway.

"Fool!" thundered the ruffian, snatching a long, wicked-looking knife from his belt, "I shall put you out of the race!"

He had raised the knife aloft and was advancing on his defenceless victim, when a sharp revolver shot rang out and the bullet sent the murderous weapon spinning to the other side of the cave.

The startled outlaws looked quickly around, to find Donald Courtney standing in the cavern. He held a smoking revolver which covered their chief, and around him stood a dozen resolute-looking men of Dixie, each holding a Remington pointed in the direction of the outlaws.

"Hands up, all! You are my prisoners!" admonished the County Sheriff, stepping forth from the ranks of his grim-looking posse.



"Two plump arms encircled a willing neck."

"Up with your hands, Brad Hillrung!" he thundered, advancing on the outlaw. "Your race of deviltry has run its course."

The baffled mine superintendent snarled an oath, but realizing that the first hostile move would be his death-signal, he reluctantly followed the example of his band, and they were soon securely tied.

"Mr. Courtney," exclaimed Mr. Steel, advancing with outstretched hand toward that young man, "you saved my life. I humbly beg your pardon for my past actions."

Before Donald could make a reply a glad cry was heard, a form fairly flew over the rocky floor of the cavern, a joyous, "Oh! Donald!" was heard, two plump arms encircled a willing neck, and Lettice was sobbing happily on the breast of the man she loved.

The sheriff found much stolen booty in the cavern, and conducted the captured outlaws to prison, where they later expiated their wrongdoings. A conveyance was found to carry our friends to Dixie. Lettice urged a hasty visit to the Silver Cascade. The Count remained in Dixie under plea of an immediate return to France.

L. of C.

"Adieu, mademoiselle," he exclaimed, bowing lowly over the gloved hand that Lettice presented, "I see that you have ze monsieur and happiness discover."

The party were soon in the saddle and galloping up the mountain trail toward the "Milt Connor," on reaching which Donald and his chum gave up their residence to their friends.

They were shown through all the works of the mine, and Donald and Lettice passed many happy hours alone, visiting the many points of wild and beautiful mountain scenery.

A week's time was required by Mr. Steel to reorganize the working and appoint a trustworthy manager for his mines, after which he decided to return to St. Louis. Donald was easily prevailed upon to return with them.

Leaving a trusted manager in charge of their mines, the party started on their journey to St. Louis. On reaching Stites they encountered a party of St. Louis capitalists, who, attracted by the fabulous reports of the Thunder Mountain district, had come to make personal investigations, with a view to investing. The result was that the Milt Connor properties were transferred to them for a considera-

tion of figures which went near the million mark. The party then resumed their journey to St. Louis, where soon after their arrival Donald and Lettice celebrated their nuptials at the palatial residence of the bride's uncle. One week later they sailed for Europe, and soon after their return a year later a new sign adorned the front of the building formerly occupied by the brokerage firm of Steel & Bland, which read as follows: "Steel, Bland & Courtney, Brokers."

THE END.

DEC 19 1904.